India’s Political Parties

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As elections near, growing dissension among India's political leaders is evident. What is the position of the Congress and its opposition?

Editor's note: This article, based on first-hand observation in India, describes some of the factors lying behind the recent political crisis in that country. This was precipitated by Prime Minister Nehru's resignation from the Working Committee of the Congress Party, and was finally resolved by the subsequent resignation of the entire Working Committee, headed by Purshottamdas Tandon, Nehru's conservative Hindu opponent, and the nearly unanimous election of Nehru as President of the All-India Congress Committee, the party's highest policy-making body. Professor Levi's article was written after Nehru's resignation but before his election as party President, a development interpreted by political observers as meaning that because of his great popularity with the voters, which the party needed in the impending election, Nehru had for the present at least won a commanding position in party councils.

The recent defection of many prominent members of the Congress Party is one symptom of the rapid changes occurring in India's internal politics. A tense economic and social situation, combined with the prospect of elections in January, has raised political activity to unprecedented heights. Dissatisfied, ambitious, or opportunistic elements see a good chance to form new parties or to strengthen old ones in competition with the dominant Congress Party.

The slow deterioration of the Congress Party can easily be understood if we remember that originally it was not a party in the usual sense, but an organized national movement for freedom from British rule. To this major aim matters of detail, questions of the nature of a future free India, and above all personalities, were subordinated. The vast majority of Indians found it possible to cooperate in a common struggle for a goal that was only broadly and vaguely defined. Factions having the most diverse, even mutually exclusive, views and interests worked side by side. And everyone hoped that his day would come when the battle with Britain was won.

But the Indian National Congress is no exception to the rule that unions designed for a single purpose begin to fall apart when that purpose is achieved. The unifying force of the fight for freedom is waning, and there is no other common objective which might renew it. On the contrary, now that the problem is to build up a free India, irreconcilable differences of opinion arise as to means, methods, and goals. Tensions among the groups composing the Congress, hitherto hidden or suppressed, are coming into the open.

On assuming the responsibility of government the Congress leadership found that it had to cease being vague, to take a stand, to adopt definite policies, and above all to show results and to satisfy high expectations. Yet in every respect the government's attitude thus far has been much more moderate and hesitant than might have been expected from the composition of the Congress or from the promises made during the fighting days. Congress policies indicate that the conservatives in the party have gained predominant influence. A shift of political power in their favor has taken place.

In fact, the Congress is no longer the political instrument of the Indian people but only of certain sections of it. It is becoming a political party in the conventional sense: a party of the right. The late Sardar Patel, "realist," "strong man," and "boss of the machine," was responsible for this development. In September 1950 his supporters, the majority in the party executive, succeeded in electing Purshottamdas Tandon as party President over Acharya J. B. Kripalani, who was more acceptable to Nehru. As a consequence of this trend, opposition to the Congress high command, i.e. to the government, has increased rapidly both within and outside the party.

Nehru and Conflicts in the Congress

Since the opposition comes chiefly from the left, it would seem that the Congress with its conservative majority, together with the Hindu Mahasabha, represents the right wing in Indian politics today. Opposition within the party is still possible, providing the majority and minority views are not too far apart. This situation will presumably continue so long as Nehru himself disagrees with his colleagues in the party executive. But the conservative group is increasingly unwilling to tolerate contradiction, and its policy is becoming more rigid. Some members of this group felt so confident of their control of the party that they saw no need to "appease" Nehru to win the elections.

Nehru has therefore found it more and more difficult to reconcile differences within the Congress. His numerous appeals for unity have failed to halt resignations of Congress members. That they have had any success at all has been mostly due to Nehru's high standing with the masses, the almost unanimous agreement that there is no alternative in sight for the premiership, and the attraction of being a member of the still powerful Congress. Nehru has now reinforced his appeals by his resignation from the party executive and the central election committee. By this step, which threatened the very party unity which he was so anxious to preserve, he presumably hoped to strengthen the hand of the progressive minority in the executive and to avoid the nomination of additional reactionary candidates. His action raised a dilemma for the conservative wing: on the one hand, they disliked Nehru's policies, but on the other hand, they realized the enormous asset which Nehru represented for the party.

Even if Nehru emerges victorious from this struggle for power, it must be considered as an essentially personal victory. The conservative forces are firmly in the saddle, and the chances are slight that opposition leaders can materially change Congress policies from within. Those who left their safe positions in the organization to join another party or to create a new one of their own must have felt that there was little possibility of realizing their ideals within the Congress. For to leave the party is a daring move for anyone with political ambitions.

The party still has an overwhelming following among the people. This is

hardly due to any benefits received since independence; indeed, criticism of the Congress is astonishingly widespread, though the grounds of criticism vary. The strength of the Congress is due largely to the absence of any other equally effective political organization. New parties have to start from scratch and to work against heavy odds. They will have to persevere for years in order to become known and to create a following in the villages, without which no democratic party can succeed. And they will never be able to compete successfully with the Congress so long as the personalities and the prestige associated with the latter in the struggle for freedom survive.

Nevertheless, a number of politicians have sought to challenge the Congress's entrenched position. In some cases, for instance with the Socialists, the decision was inevitable sooner or later because of fundamental differences of principle; in others, as with Acharya J. B. Kripalani and the dissident Calcutta group, the motives were more complicated, involving personalities as well as differences of opinion. In all cases, genuine and deep dissatisfaction with the record of the Congress during the past three years has been a major factor. It would be quite wrong to ascribe the present political ferment merely to opportunism and expediency in view of the impending elections.

Communist Policies and Position

The Communist Party has been an independent organization since its foundation in 1924. However, some of its members worked as Communists inside the Congress. Its policy is identical with that of other Communist Parties elsewhere. The Moscow-dictated line is followed even when it is unpalatable to most Indians, as in the case of the Chinese aggression in Korea and in Tibet. The party demands a working-class government, nationalization of all foreign-owned industry, and confiscation of "feudal" estates without compensation. India is to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Nations and join the "peace camp led by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China." The party's propaganda output in the form of cheap pamphlets and "peace" meetings is prodigious. But in spite of energetic efforts it has not attracted a large following. The reasons for this rather surprising fact are largely peculiar to India, and temporary. [1] The party suffers from personality difficulties; it is considered traitorous because of its support of Great Britain (as an ally of Russia, of course) during the second World War; it is unpopular because of its violent methods; and its supposed "revolutionary dynamics" have little appeal to the masses of Indians.

Probably because of its failure to attract a large following and perhaps also because of the strong stand taken against it by the government, the party has changed its tactics recently. [2] It no longer operates prominently as an individual organization. Instead it has fused a number of leftist groups into front organizations and these, as "electoral alliances," oppose the Congress in local elections. They have had some success in Calcutta and in the former French colony of Chandernagore. They will also function in the national elections, in addition to the party itself.

1. See Werner Levi, "India Debates Foreign Policy," Far Eastern Survey, March 7, 1951.

2. See Jean A. Gurran, Jr., "Dissension Among India's Communists," Far Eastern Survey, July 12, 1950.

The Socialist Bid for Power

The Socialists left the Congress in 1948 to form their own party. They had delayed this step at Gandhi's request in the hope that they could strengthen his hand against the ascendancy of the conservative forces. After Gandhi's death they fully realized the futility of working within the Congress. They also believe that democracy in India requires the existence of an effective opposition party, which they hope to provide.

At present the party is weak, except in some urban centers. This is due largely to its youth, to its highly intellectual and idealist leadership, and to its former policy of demanding that its members devote several hours per week to work for the party. This policy has now changed and the party aims at becoming a mass organization. It is extremely active in the villages, with the intention first of becoming known, and thereafter of spreading its ideas. The rather remarkable peasant demonstrations which the party has been able to organize indicate that it is meeting with some success.

The leadership hopes to gain 15 percent of the vote next January and a majority in the foreseeable future. This optimism is based not only upon the enthusiastic work of the leaders themselves, but also upon the conviction that the dissatisfied elements leaving the Congress will turn to the Socialist Party. However, so far most of these groups, Kripalani's among them, have preferred to form their own parties. Nevertheless the Socialist Party at present is the only secular Indian party of nation-wide significance which appears capable of becoming a serious competitor to the Congress.

Its 12,000 -word platform for the coming elections contains the usual promises of cleaning up the government and of guaranteeing equal rights to women, minorities, and refugees. It foresees a mixed economy of socialized major industries, cooperative home industries and agriculture, and private enterprise in small undertakings and small-scale farming. The land is to be distributed so that the maximum holding per farm family will be 30 acres of average productivity. A plan worked out jointly by village communities and the government will aim at the improvement of agricultural methods and of land utilization, and at the welfare of farmers.

True to the Indian Socialists' belief that India's most important resource is its

labor, great stress is laid throughout the program upon volunteer work. The Socialist platform calls for India's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, for neutrality in the cold war, and for collective security arrangements among the nations situated between Egypt and Indonesia.

The youngest political group, which may have potential strength, is the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party, or, for short, the Praja or People's Party. It is essentially the creation of Acharya J. B. Kripalani, a former Congress member of 36 years' standing, a former Congress President, and a close collaborator with Gandhi. Having lost out in a struggle for power inside the Congress in 1950, Kripalani went into active opposition, partly with the backing of Nehru. Whatever personal disappointments may have decided him to form the new party, there can be little doubt of his genuine dissatisfaction with the inefficiency and corruption of the Congress. He is convinced that in its present condition the Congress is unfit to lead the country. That several thousand Congressmen chose to join him is an indication of the strength of the criticism prevailing.

The basic disagreement of the Praja Party members with the Congress is not so much over principles as over their practical application and execution. Characteristically, therefore, the party's manifesto and much of its propaganda are devoted to a severe attack upon the lack of efficiency, integrity, and spirit of service in the present administration. Its positive program, a middle way for India, does not differ greatly from the Congress program.

The party advocates a balanced economy which is "neither capitalist nor Communist." In the vital land question, the platform calls only for the prevention of further subdivision of landholdings, without saying anything concrete about the fate of the large estates except that all land should belong to the tiller of the soil. The platform advocates the organization of landless farm laborerers. In the field of industry, it calls for cottage and decentralized industry to the greatest possible extent. Only a few key industries are to be nationalized. All other "centralized industries" are to be run by "autonomous corporations or by co-operatives representative of various interests including the State;" and in general the sector of the economy operated by private enterprise is to be subject to "social control." The party's preoccupation with internal problems is emphasized by the platform's statement that "we would fain not talk of foreign policy," but for the sake of completeness it proceeds to call for neutrality in the cold war.

The remaining secular parties are of little political significance. The National Liberal Federation, which resembles a club more than a party, has some slight influence owing to the high quality of its discussions and resolutions.

The members are a loose group of liberal, moderate, and very able intellectuals who meet once a year to discuss current issues. The Forward Bloc obtained some publicity through its late leader, Subash Chandra Bose, once President of the Congress against Gandhi's wish, collaborator with the Japanese, creator of a Japanese-approved Indian liberation army, and a man with considerable popular following during his lifetime. Bose's followers claim to be real socialists. They have a purely local strength in Bengal.

The religious Hindu Mahasabha is regaining influence. It was established early in this century as a reaction to the Moslem League, and its main purpose then was the protection of Hindu rights. But as Hindus were in the majority, the Mahasabha never had a really essential task to fulfill. It willingly left broader questions of policy to the Congress and was satisfied to work to preserve Hindu religion, culture, and traditions.

With the growing political activities of the Moslem League, the Mahasabha too became more politicalminded, and by the middle of the thirties it had developed into a communal political party. For a while the substance of its politics was anti-Moslem, and its major activity consisted in making Congress policies more anti-Moslem. It did not participate constantly and actively in national politics, but came forth with resolutions at times of crisis or on important issues.

The conflict between India and Pakistan has again provided the Mahasabha with a cause, and has made it particularly attractive to the Hindu refugees from Pakistan. In spite of a progressive-sounding platform, Mahasabha policies are essentially reactionary. The party in effect stands for extreme nationalism, militarism, expansionism, and Pan-Hinduism. Openly, it agitates at present only for reunion with Pakistan. Privately, some members dream of recreating a larger Hindu empire as it existed hundreds of years ago.

Such viewpoints make the party a center of attraction for various kinds of reactionary elements in India. Many Indians fear that the Mahasabha may become the nucleus of a quasi-Fascist group composed of its own members, the most conservative wing of the Congress, some business interests, and some military interests which have become communal-minded in the conflict with Pakistan. The party already has its "storm troopers" in the form of the RSS, [1] a militant group ready for action at any time. There is no official link between the party and the RSS, but a close relationship exists.

1. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Voluntary Service Association). See Jean A. Curran, Jr., "The RSS: Militant Hinduism," Far Eastern Survey,

May 17, 1950.

Weakness of Opposition Today

The lively political activity in India may, on the one hand, appear desirable in a young democracy. On the other hand, most Indians are anxious to avoid the many evils of a multiplicity of parties; the constitution envisages a two-party system. For the time being there is no danger of an unstable central government due to a profusion of parties, although a dozen or so parties are competing in the January elections. The overwhelming power of the Congress is not yet likely to be broken. Too many of the other parties are either instruments of individuals, or created for special and limited purposes, or founded upon purely local conditions.

Above all, however, with the exception of the Socialist and Communist parties, they have so far failed to offer a real political alternative to the Congress. They criticize the corruption and inefficiency of the government-a criticism frequently heard in the Congress itself-and its failure to solve the many problems of India. But they do not offer a convincing program of their own which would indicate that they could improve upon the performance of the Congress if given the chance. In other words they lack a raison d'être. To a degree they are characteristic of the mood of the people, critical and dissatisfied, but unwilling or unable to remove the causes of their feelings.